

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master Degree in International Management from the NOVA – School of Business and Economics.

## THE POWER OF CONTROVERSY: THE ALLURE OF CONTROVERSIAL BRANDS

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## Abstract

Powerlessness can encourage people to increase their consumption. They do so to restore their feelings of control. It is interesting to understand what characteristics of a brand attract them in powerless states. The allure of controversy could be the answer. Controversial behaviors bear a social cost, e.g. social backlash and gossip, which can signal power and authority. A brand that is perceived that way could display the same authority that is seemingly so attractive. That is, by embodying controversial attributes which help powerless consumers restore their power. An experiment in the context of a recent brand controversy did not find support for these hypotheses.

Keywords: Power, Consumption, Brand, Controversy

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Marketers continuously try to create value for organizations by building brands and products that customers can identify with and which help them express or complement their psychological needs and aspirations. Previous research on consumer behavior indicates that consumers who feel powerless, or experience other psychological deficits, increase their consumption in order to compensate for negative feelings. (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018) Thus, understanding the preferences of individuals that engage in consumption as a means of compensation for lack of positive psychological states can help to fulfill their needs. Marketers can achieve that by creating targeted brands and products. This research aims to contribute to the literature on compensatory consumer behavior by exploring whether controversial branding contributes to the attraction of consumers that experience psychological deficits, in this case, powerlessness.

Studies suggest that behaviors that bear a social cost, e.g., backlash and gossip, signal power and authority. Relatively powerless people have an even stronger perception of the amplified authority. (Bellezza, Gino & Anat, 2014) This research hypothesizes that powerless consumers could have the same interpretation of controversial brands and therefore be attracted to them. It adds to the current literature on compensatory consumption because it is unknown if individuals consume brands that engage in controversial topics in order to restore their lack of power. Those effects on consumer behavior remained untouched and are open for research.

## Powerless consumers

This research focuses on the variable powerlessness on consumption patterns in particular. Thus, this study could be useful for organizations because they could use this knowledge to target specific groups of consumers by offering them customized products that fulfill their

emotional and psychological needs. Marketers could create brands that are intentionally controversial and attract the target group of consumers that feel powerless. That way, they can generate greater benefits for both the organization and its consumers. The customers receive greater value by a product that is personally perceived as more valuable and the business can increase revenue by supplying a yet unfulfilled demand.

## Literature Review

Exploring the importance of feelings of power on consumer behavior can give great insights for building brands and targeting the right groups. Almost any individual is confronted with the notation of power in the course of their life. Through social interactions they perceive themselves in a psychological state of being powerful or powerless. In society there are forces that divide individuals into positions of higher or lower power; such as CEOs versus their subordinate employees or teachers versus their students. Thus, the same person can perceive different levels of control depending on the situations they find themselves in. (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008)

Therefore, it is relevant to understand in what compensating behaviors people engage when they perceive a lack of control. Powerlessness can stem from various sources, such as lack of self-concept clarity, status, financial success or even due to physical circumstances. However, it is interesting to test whether non-conformity, including controversy, is appealing to consumers that experience a lack of power. Before exploring the literature on these topics, the terms of controversy and power must be defined. In the following section “Definitions”, controversy, power and compensatory consumption are explained.

## Definitions

### Controversy

Controversy is a public matter which can be explained with three variables. It involves “contention” as well as “importance”. In order for it to be considered as a controversial topic, it has to be important, relevant and disputable to a significant amount of people. (Jang, Dori-Hacohen & Allan, 2017) In conclusion, controversy includes three variables, namely contention, importance and the number of people that are interested in that controversial topic. In this study the three variables are included to create the perception of controversy. Moreover, polarization is often used as a synonym for controversy but it has a slightly different meaning. Polarizing products are strongly liked or disliked by some and are recognized to be more self-expressive in their nature. (Rozenkrants, Wheeler & Shiv, 2017) This highlights the exclusive aspect of polarization. In comparison with controversy it stands out that the variables of importance and number of interested people are not contained within the term. Thus, it can be stated that polarization is not enough of a criterion to describe controversy. Polarization would have a different effect than controversy because the latter breaks norms for a specific group of people, but polarization does not, so polarization should not be related to perceptions of power.

### Power

Since the allure of controversial brands is tested in this paper, relevant terms that are mentioned within that context are to be defined. A lack of power is shown to alter consumption patterns. When individuals perceive a lack of control they engage in compensatory consumption behaviors. (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018)

Compensatory consumption could lead to a preference for controversial brands and thereby restore feelings of power. That is based on the research on the “Red Sneakers Effect”.

(Bellezza, Gino & Anat, 2014) Intentionally controversial behavior is associated with higher levels of autonomy and power because the person is not worried about the involved social risk and has higher levels of self-regulation.

Power is defined as asymmetric control over valued resources. (Galinsky, Gruenfeld & Magee, 2008) The feeling, namely powerlessness, can therefore be derived from minimal or no control over valued resources. In the course of this work such resources will be related to personal positive psychological states, for example status or freedom. Although some literature like Levav and Zhu (2009) focuses on powerlessness in the form of a lack of control over physical circumstances such as narrow or overly crowded spaces, the focus of this study will lie on psychological root causes.

### Compensatory Consumption

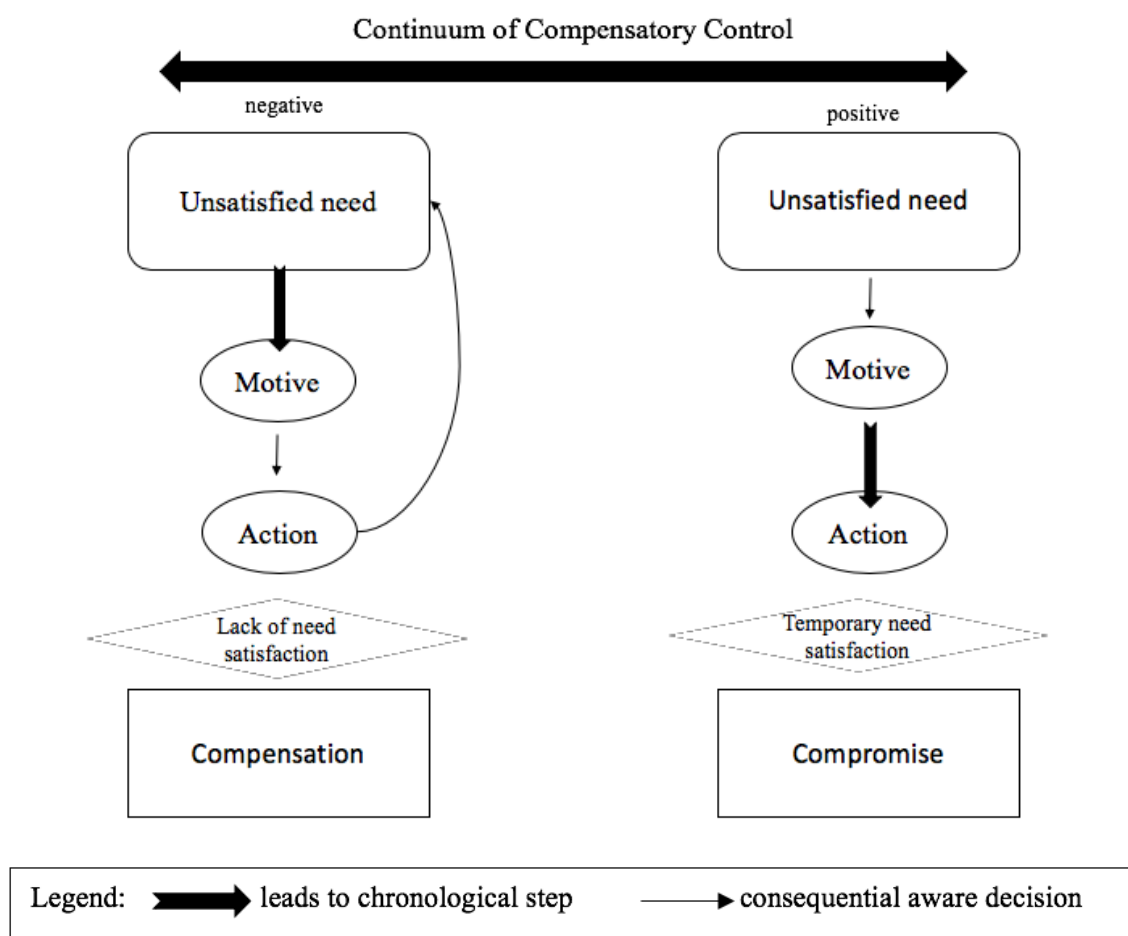
Compensatory consumption derives from the fact that people try to compensate for various things by altering their consumption. For example, most people might have experienced that they eat more sweets when they are disappointed or go shopping to make themselves feel better or to treat themselves. Such behavior is primarily done in order to acquire a false sense of control and power, even if the person is not directly aware of it. (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018)

In figure 1 Gronmo (1988) studied the behavior of consumers who were conscious and not conscious about their core problems when it came to powerlessness. When examining the way that people decide to compensate for their lack of control he described that people can choose to do it either positively or negatively.

Individuals who were aware of their real issue of not being able to fulfill a goal or desire and feeling a lack of control were able to make an internal compromise. This positive approach

recognizes that a compensatory action, such as the purchase of a service or product can bring temporary satisfaction. On the other end of the spectrum there is a person who engages in compulsive consumption that can lead to negative psychological and financial consequences for the individual. Since he/she is not aware of the core issue, the choices being made are not fulfilling nor restoring a sense of power. (Gronmo, 1988)

Figure 1: Continuum of Compensatory Control. (Gronmo, 1988)



There are various types of compensatory consumption. Amaldoss and Jain (2005) state that the consumption of conspicuous goods can signal the valorization of self-esteem after experiencing feelings of powerlessness. Such products are socially attributed to status, wealth and indicate belonging to a specific group within society. In more recent years, this trend

stemming from Babyboomers has been shifting from luxurious goods towards conspicuous but socially and environmentally friendly consumption patterns. (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018).

However, there are also studies that observe the consumer behavior when the lack of control stems from a physical state of being. Research was conducted on the way that consumers act when they are confronted with small and narrow spaces. Reportedly, such circumstances trigger the search for more unique and various products. Feeling confined and, therefore, powerless caused them to seek variety. (Levav & Zhu ,2009)

Moreover, a highly crowded and dense environment led consumers to engage more in word-of-mouth to regain a sense of control over the situation. It was also observed that people engaged less in this form of compensation when they had the chance to restore their power in a different way prior to that. (Consiglio, De Angelis & Costabile, 2018)

### The relationship between controversy and power

The effects of controversial, non-conformal behavior on the observers is relevant for this study. In general, non-conformity is associated with competence, autonomy and power. For example, when a person enters a luxurious store dressed in a tracksuit and sneakers instead of an elegant outfit it signals a sense of power to the observer. Or when a professor teaches in Flip Flops it symbolizes his authority and that he has no fear of being dismissed due to disobeying the dress code. That is because engagement in behaviors that deviate from the norm bear a high social risk, such as backlash, gossip and negative responses. When a person does not care about the risk it shows that he or she has high self-regulation and autonomy. These traits are particularly valued in Western cultures that favor individualism.

Regarding the observers, the beforementioned association of power to non-conforming behavior applies to the general population. Non-conformity loses its link to power when the



behavior seems to be unintentional. In practice, that means that brands have to show that their products and image deviate from the norm intentionally. (Bellezza, Gino & Anat, 2014)

Since engaging in controversial topics and behaviors also bears a social risk it could be associated to power, status and autonomy.

People who experience a lack of power are more drawn to brand leaders than individuals who do not experience such feelings. That is because they believe that they have personal agency and that restores their feelings of powerlessness. In some cases it is even enough to just affiliate with a leader in order to acquire a sense of security. When consumers with a lack of control associate themselves with brands that are leaders, they feel a higher sense of security and restoration. (Beck, Rahinel & Bleier, 2019)

(Brand) leaders are usually perceived to have autonomy, status and control, which are attributes associated with non-conformity. Thus, there could be a relationship between the allure of controversial brands as a means of compensation for individuals with a lack of power.

In the following, the methodology for the study will be discussed in order to test the hypothesis about the attractiveness and allure of controversial brands for people who experience a lack of power.

## Study

### Methodology

For the purpose of testing the hypothesis and exploring the collected data a study has been conducted. Afterwards, the data was analyzed with a statistical program. The general

underlying hypothesis is that brands that are controversial are perceived as more powerful. That is especially by people who feel powerless.

The brand Nike has been chosen for the purpose of the study because it is widely known brand, a leading company in the sports industry, and they use various marketing strategies and techniques, which are beneficial in this context. Choosing an existing and well-known brand has the advantage that it lowers the risk of participants being indifferent in regards to the survey. It could awake stronger emotions and result in a higher engagement while participating. It has been decided to not show a fictional brand because it could seem less authentic and awaken little interest in the participants. Also, a non-fictional ad with significant results could be more interesting and offer more relevant insights with the help of a real life case.

Furthermore, the choice of the ad is a display ad and not a video commercial. That is because there are more variables involved in a video than in a simple photograph. The goal was to find two ads that are as similar as possible with a single different component which was the controversy.

#### Controversial variables of the ad

As it was mentioned in the section “Descriptions”, there are three variables that contribute to controversy. Namely, contention, importance and that it involves a significant amount of individuals. (Jang, Dori-Hacohen & Allan, 2017)

Those have been taken into account before choosing the real controversial Nike ad that has been shown to the participants in the controversial condition. The ad depicts the American

football player Colin Kaepernick in black and white with the statement: “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” (ad is in appendix 1). Due to his political activism for racial inequality regarding Afro-Americans in the US he was involved in a public dispute. It was discussed a lot in the media and several political figures got involved, including Donald Trump. Nike decided to support Colin Kaepernick’s political activism and chose him as a testimonial in their advertising. Thus, Nike’s ad caused a lot of controversy and polarization around the brand. The ad was part of the “Dream Crazy” campaign in 2019.

The chosen ad included all three variables (contention, importance, substantial number of people) regarding controversy. Contention is part of the ad because it caused a polarizing public dispute. Moreover, Nike’s commercial was important, because it involved issues about racial inequality in the United States. Since it was a public dispute that was discussed in the media it involved a significant number of people.

The non-controversial condition saw a real Nike ad that was seemingly very similar, portraying another American football player in black and white with a different motivational statement (depicted in appendix 2). It stemmed from the same series of “Dream Crazy” commercials. However, there was no controversy involved.

## Participants

Due to convenience sampling where the survey is distributed to the people in feasible reach, the participants of this study come from various demographics, psychographics and nationalities. That is because it is presumed that the hypothesis is about a behavioral response that applies to the general population within this specific circumstance and not of a target group.

There were 217 complete survey responses. Across all groups, there were approximately 40% male and 60% female participants. 33.2% indicated that their political orientation is left center and 32.7% positioned themselves in the center. The average age of the participants was 28 years old, with the oldest participant being 69 and the youngest 18. Most frequently, they stated that their nationalities were Austrian, German, Belgian, Dutch, Italian and Portuguese.

## Procedure

The participants were randomly allocated to three conditions, the controversial ad condition, non-controversial ad condition, and control condition.

The controversial condition saw a real controversial ad of the brand Nike with a description and information about the controversy that it had caused. The three variables for controversy, mentioned in the section “Controversy”, were part of the ad. Contention was incorporated because the ad was subject of a polarizing public dispute in which the media and political figures like Donald Trump were involved as well. The controversial subject is important, because it is about the topic of racial inequality in the USA. Also, it involved a large number of people because it was discussed in the media.

The non-controversial condition watched a non-controversial ad with a neutral description of it (both the controversial and non-controversial condition are reported in full in appendix).

The control condition did not see an ad. Afterwards, they were asked a few questions about their general opinion about Nike. Namely, they rated the extent to which Nike is authentic and unique, has the ability to shape outcomes and has influence in the world, and whether they perceive it to be a powerful brand (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; all items in

appendix 3). They were also asked to which extent they agreed on the statements that Nike is a leader in its industry compared to its peers and if they were willing to pay a premium for Nike products. That was followed by a scale to measure their chronic level of power.

(Anderson, John & Keltner, 2012)

The chronic level of power is measured by seven questions according to Anderson, John and Keltner (2012). These questions are mentioned below in Table 1. Each one of them is answered on a psychometric seven-level Likert-scale which is commonly used in surveys. The scale goes from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. (Field, 2013)

Table 1: Overview of Chronic power level related questions. (Anderson, John & Keltner, 2012)

Q1	In relationships with others my wishes do not carry much weight.
Q2	In relationships with others I can get them to listen to what I say.
Q3	In relationships with others I can get them to do what I want.
Q4	In relationships with others if I want to, I get to make the decisions.
Q5	In relationships with others even when I try, I am not able to get my way.
Q6	In relationships with others even if I voice them, my views have little sway.
Q7	In relationships with others my ideas and opinions are often ignored.
Q8	In relationships with others I think I have a great deal of power.

Finally, participants were shown the same ad again and they had to answer various questions about it. Namely, they rated the extent to which the ad was controversial, traitorous, creative and of high quality (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; all items in appendix 4).

Moreover, they were asked to which extent they agreed on the statement that they agree with the message conveyed in the ad, the values communicated in the ad (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) and that the ad has been made very well overall (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The control condition was asked the same questions except the ones that were specifically about the commercials.

## Result and Discussion

It is predicted that the controversy around brands exudes authority and power. The allure of controversial brands that results in higher attraction towards them is expressed as an increased purchase intention. In order to test the hypothesis it was narrowed down more specifically:

H1: People who feel more powerless (vs. powerful), express higher purchase intentions in the controversial condition compared to their counterparts in the non-controversial and control condition.

## Metrics

Based on the hypothesis, multiple metrics can be derived:

**Dependent variable:** Purchase Intention

**Independent variable:** Treatment (3 Conditions: control condition, controversy condition and non-controversial condition)

**Moderator:** Chronic power (average of seven items in table 1;  $\alpha = .827$ ).

**Population:** 70 participants (convenience sample).

## Analysis

To validate whether the experiment's setup was conducted correctly, a one-way ANOVA test was performed. The participants were asked if they perceived the ad presented in their group as controversial or not, based on the statement "This ad is controversial". As a dependent variable, the variable controversy is measured, and the factor corresponds to the conditions. The condition can be either controversial condition, non-controversial condition or control condition. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the condition on the controversy of the ad. An analysis of variance showed that the effect of the condition on the controversy of the ad was significant,  $F(1,151) = 13.296$ ,  $p = .000365$ .

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the controversial condition ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.611$ ) was significantly different from the non-controversial condition ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.682$ ).

For the analysis, participants' chronic power levels, in this study referred to as "Chronic Power", is computed based on the seven questions that measure chronic power levels according to Anderson, John and Keltner (2012). The chronic power level is calculated by computing the mean of the seven questions related to power. This results into a numeric value between one and seven.

## Hypothesis testing

To test the hypothesis, whether people who feel more powerless (vs. powerful) express higher purchase intentions in the controversial condition compared to their counterparts in the non-controversial condition, a multiple regression procedure (Aiken and West 1997) is conducted. In a first-step model, the controversial and non-controversial dummy and power, were entered

as predictors of purchase intention. This model ( $R^2 = .009$ ,  $F(3, 213) = .670$ ,  $p = .571$ ) did not reveal a main effect of both conditions. The controversial condition revealed ( $B = -.222$ ,  $se = .283$ ,  $t(df) = -.783$ ,  $p = .434$ ), where the non-controversial condition revealed ( $B = .082$ ,  $se = .288$ ,  $t(df) = .285$ ,  $p = .776$ ) and power ( $B = .120$ ,  $se = .147$ ,  $t(df) = .815$ ,  $p = .416$ ).

In a second step, I entered the interaction between condition and power to the main effects model above. This step revealed an insignificant interaction ( $R^2 = 0.007$ ,  $F \text{ change}(2, 211) = .499$ ). The effect of power in the controversial condition revealed ( $B = -.437$ ,  $se = .372$ ,  $t(df) = -1.177$ ,  $p = .241$ ) and the effect of power in the non-controversial condition revealed ( $B = -.248$ ,  $se = .397$ ,  $t(df) = -.625$ ,  $p = .533$ ).

### Exploratory Analysis

A series of univariate tests were undertaken to explore patterns in the dataset. Of note, these analyses were purely exploratory. For each univariate test of a dependent variable, the fixed factor was the variable “Condition”, a categorical variable with three levels. Namely, controversial ad, non-controversial ad, or control group. The following tests were undertaken, but no significant results emerged:

- How people in every condition (non-controversial, controversial and control group) agreed to the statement “Nike is authentic”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Nike has the ability to shape the outcomes in the world”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “I feel empowered by Nike”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Nike is fearless”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “I intend to support Nike and its mission in the future”



- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Wearing Nike’s clothing would make me feel more powerful”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “I am willing to pay a premium for Nike clothing”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Nike can afford to do what it wants”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Nike is fa leader compared to its peers in its industry”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Nike can have an effect on society”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “Nike has influence in the world
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “I perceive Nike to be a powerful brand”
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “I agree with the message the ad conveys
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “The quality of this ad is high
- How people in every condition agreed to the statement “This ad has been made very well overall

## Conclusion and Limitations

In this paper the allure of controversial brands on relatively powerless people has been addressed. Prior research observed that people turn to consumption in order to restore a false sense of power (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). For the link of compensation for powerlessness the attention was put on the factors and attributes that could be attractive for

powerless people. In a research about “The Red Sneakers Effect” it was stated, that behaviors that bear a social cost are in general perceived as a sign of authority and power. (Bellezza, Gino & Anat, 2014) Therefore, the participants in this study have been divided into three groups. They were exposed to a controversial or a non-controversial ad, the control group did not see an ad. The controversial ad was supposed to represent a brand that is positioning itself with a controversial brand persona. Next, the relative chronic power levels of all participants have been measured in order to regress it against their purchase intentions after seeing an ad (or no ad in case of the control group). Finally, the results showed no significance.

There are several reasons as to why the results of the study regarding the hypothesis were not significant. Even though the experiment showed significantly that the ad was perceived as controversial, it does not prove that the whole brand is perceived as controversial. This study does not measure a correlation between the ad and the brand’s image as a whole. Moreover, whilst it has some positive effects, such as more authenticity and lower risk of participants’ indifference in regards to the questionnaire, that a well-known brand, namely Nike, has been used in the study, it also bears some negative side effects. It could have been that the participants were partially biased through personal preferences. Furthermore, there might be other aspects that contribute to stronger controversy that have not been taken into account throughout the research and survey. For example, higher media coverage in the region in which the survey has been conducted. Most of the participants in this study were coming from European countries, whereas the controversial ad was mostly displayed in the USA and was regarding a controversial topic about racial inequality in the USA. Thus, the perceived controversy was perhaps not strong enough and did not result in a significant emotional result among participants.

Moreover, since the variable of power is about the psychological state of humans it is more difficult to measure and does not fall into a categorical measure which would ease the analysis.

## Future work

It is recommended that future research on this topic explores a stronger and more effective display of a controversial brand. That could be done by creating a fictional brand or by showing numerous ads and commercials. However, it is to be taken into account that a larger variety of ads and the inclusion of videos bears the risk that there are too many variables between the controversial and the non-controversial versions. That could distort the results. Ideally, a fictional brand should have an identical copy with an additional controversial component for the purpose of a study. Moreover, it can be interesting to do further exploration on how people define controversy and whether the way that relatively powerless people perceive controversy differs from powerful ones. Understanding different groups of consumers can provide a better understanding for their needs and desires.

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## Appendices

### 1) Ad shown in the controversial condition

“US-American football player Colin Kaepernick caused a nationwide controversy when he kneeled during the national anthem (rather than stand, as it is customary). He didn’t want to show pride “for a country that oppresses black people and people of color”. Kaepernick referred to incidents of racism and police brutality against Afro-Americans in the US. This caused a lot of controversy and outrage. Many thought Kaepernick’s protest had been disrespectful. This controversy was subject of heated and angry discussions in the media. Subsequently, Nike decided to feature Colin Kaepernick in its “Just do it.” campaign. “



2) Ad shown in the non-controversial condition

“US-American football player Shaquem Griffin made the news as the first one-handed player in the NFL. When Shaquem’s intake into the NFL was being discussed it caught media attention because he would be the first to play with only one hand. Eventually, the final decision was made and he could play for the Seattle Seahawks. One year later, Shaquem received a NCAA award for his inspirational life decisions and persistence.

Subsequently, Nike decided to feature Shaquem Griffin in its “Just do it.” campaign.”



3) General questions about Nike; (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Nike is authentic.
- Nike has the ability to shape outcomes in the world.
- I feel empowered by Nike.
- Nike is fearless.
- I intend to support Nike and its mission in the future.
- Wearing Nike’s clothing would make me feel powerful.



- I am willing to pay a premium for Nike clothing.
- Nike can afford to do what it want.
- Nike is a leader compared to its peers in its industry.
- Nike can have an effect on society.
- Nike is unique.
- Nike has influence in the world.
- I like the message that Nike communicates through its brand.
- I perceive Nike to be a powerful brand.

4) Questions about the ad; (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

- This ad is controversial.
- I agree with the message that the ad conveys.
- The athlete in the ad is controversial.
- I support the values communicated in this commercial.
- Nike's ad is traitorous.
- The quality of this ad is high.
- This ad is very creative.
- This ad has been made very well overall.
- I like the athlete in the ad.

## Figures

- 1) Gronmo 1988, Continuum of Compensatory Control

## Tables

- 1) Anderson, John & Keltner 2012, Overview of Chronic power level related questions.